

Perfect by agentcalliope

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Summary: How Hopper helps El get ready for Snowball, and how El comes to wear his bracelet.

Perfect

She holds the brush in her hand, its bristles tinged with pink, as she looks at her reflection in the mirror.

Hopper glances up from his newspaper, which he wasn't really reading, anyway, and narrows his eyes. She's already wearing the blue dress, the shoes. She's already taken her hair out of the rollers, stiff with hairspray, one curl resting on her forehead almost dramatically.

He stares as she stares, gripping the brush tighter and tighter. He's sitting far away on the couch, but he's close enough to see particles of pink falling from the brush, dusting the table. He stares at the back of her head, and he remembers.

He remembers a different time, a different place. A different haircut, different clothes— but the same, exact girl.

(And as he remembers, his eyes naturally gravitate to the blue on his wrist, and it reminds him of a different little girl he still loves.)

He clears his throat, and as her head whips around he continues pretending to read yesterday's paper, and licks his finger before he turns the page.

"How's it going?" He asks before he risks meeting her gaze.

And this is the Thing. The Thing that's been bothering him, day after day after day. They've been living together for about a year, and sometimes he thinks it feels like it's happened in the blink of an eye. He barely knows her.

Framed on his bedside counter, a piece of paper starting with her first name on it and ending with his last name, is just that. A piece of paper.

But sometimes he thinks it feels like forever. That they've always lived in this cabin that once was his grandfather's. That he's always reminded her to that "real food comes first", and she's always looked back at him with her big, brown eyes, and still takes a huge bite of Eggos. He really knows her.

Next to that framed piece of paper on his bedside counter, there's a photograph.

(Neither of them are smiling, something that really bothered Joyce as she took their picture. But Hopper's arm is slung across El's shoulders, and she's resting against him, and later when Joyce hands him the photograph and doesn't say anything, Hopper finds she doesn't need to say anything, anyway.)

So, that's the Thing he's been thinking about, that's been bothering him day after day after day.

And as he meets El's gaze, he realizes he knows her enough to know exactly what that face means.

"Hey, hey." He says gently, crossing the distance between them in a matter of strides. He unfurls her fist and takes the brush from her hand, meeting her eyes as she looks up at him. "It's okay."

El speaks softly. "I want it to be perfect." She swallows. "I want to be perfect."

Hopper sighs, massaging his forehead with his thumb and forefinger, trying to figure out what he could possibly say. He shakes his head, places his hand on her shoulder. "Aw, kid. Nobody is."

"Perfect?" she asks.

"Yeah." Hopper replies. "Nobody's perfect."

He bites the inside of his mouth, and blinks. He thinks for a moment and then decides.

"I'll help you. Wait here." He places the brush on the table and walks to his room, pulling out a drawer and picking out a ratty, old shirt. He comes back out, motioning for her to raise her arms, and helps her into it.

It's comical, the way the stained, large shirt falls on her, and Hopper can't help but nod and smile.

"There," He says. "Now we won't get makeup on your dress."

She smiles back, just slightly.

Hopper pulls his chair over to her side, and he reaches across her to

grab the eye shadow container before he sits down. El turns her chair towards him and he picks back up the brush and dabs it in the pink powder.

She leans forward, and closes her eyes.
He forces himself to take a breath.

(He remembers a different time, a different place. A different haircut, different clothes, but with a different girl.)

He steals a glance at the blue on his wrist. Then he taps the brush on the container, and begins the way he remembers how.

He carefully outlines her eyes, and then he lightly colors her cheeks. He uses his thumb to wipe away the pink in places its not supposed to be. And he puts the brush back into in the container, and snaps it shut, and tells her to look in the mirror.

She smiles this time, really smiles. And it's hard to place this smiling, young girl with the blue dress and pink makeup and curly hair with the girl with the torn clothes, dirt on her face, and no hair at all.

Hopper scratches his head. "What do you think?"

She turns back towards him, still smiling.

It's enough to make pause. Make him finger the blue polyester that hasn't left his wrist in years, that has even really become a part of him.

"Hold on." He croaks, and then clears his throat. "You're missing something."

El's smile fades. "What?" she asks.

Hopper swallows, takes the hair tie off of him, reaches over for her arm, and puts it on.

She looks down, and touches it gently.

"There." He says, blinking more than he wants to. "Perfect."

El looks up at him, and tilts her head to the side.

"No." She replies. "Almost perfect."

Hopper laughs. "Yeah. Almost perfect."

She smiles again—a different smile than before. A knowing smile. A

comforting smile.

(Hopper thinks about the Thing again. He wonders if she thinks about it, too. He wonders if sometimes she thinks about how she barely knows him, and then sometimes about how she really does. He thinks that today is when she really does.)

He runs his fingers through his hair and then glances at his watch, and just stops himself from cursing aloud.

"We gotta leave now, kid. You ready?"

He helps her take off his old shirt and she stands up, dusting invisible dust off her dress.

El nods. "Yes, I'm ready."

He grabs his keys, and his hat, and they head out the door.

They don't speak on the drive over, but that's okay. It's the nice kind of silence, the kind of quiet that makes you feel calm and protected. Hopper doesn't mind it at all.

When they pull up to the school, the car still running and his hands firm on the wheel, he tells her that she's to come out at 10:30 and 10:30 exactly.

"And have fun." He concludes.

El quickly turns towards him, wrapping her arms around his body, holding him tightly before letting go just as fast. "Goodbye." She says, opening the car door and leaving, shutting it close, and walking hurriedly away.

He watches her go, catching a glimpse in the dark her blue dress, her shoes, and the small strand of blue on her wrist.

And this is the Other Thing. The Other Thing that plagues him day and night after day and night.

He's scared. He's scared he's not going to be the father she needs, and certainly not the father she deserves. He's had his chance— so what makes him think that he can have another one? What makes him think that he could have a daughter, after he couldn't save Sara? But Hopper thinks that he isn't perfect, and that's okay. After all, no

one is.

And if she loves him, then that's enough.

(She does.)